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ABSTRACT

Believing that the objective, analytical, and competitive modes have already been overemphasized in educational institutions, many feminist teachers stress the subjective, contextual, and collaborative. Such changes involve not only a commitment of energy and time, but also an important shift in a teacher's perception of what counts as knowledge, equity, and learning. This raises the questions of what it means to be a teacher in the midst of making these changes, how a feminist writing teacher might view her own movement to a philosophical position and teaching style that challenge the assumptions of her own education, and how teachers interpret and remake their traditional pasts as students to help understand and evaluate what they are now attempting to do as teachers. The stories of three feminist writing teachers who had experienced these changes and who combine memories of their college learning and discussions of their current classroom practice to illustrate how they dealt with these questions take up the greater part of this paper. Certain patterns emerged: that the feminist teachers had experienced intellectually stimulating educations that failed to develop subjective response or allow the voicing of personal concerns, and that they came to use the past to critique their current practice. (PRA)

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EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF FEMINIST TEACHERS

Certain college writing classes use a collaborative, decentered model of learning, and emphasize knowledge as socially constructed. In such a classroom, the teacher does not play the traditional role of knowledge-provider; she or he does not attempt to correct or shape students' thinking and writing in strictly "objective" terms. Several strands of thinking, some from composition theory and educational theory, have converged in this kind of approach. Feminists in particular, according to Barbara DiBernard, "have made themselves responsible for not replicating the narrow exclusive hierarchical view that passed for reality in many of their own educations" (13). They respond to repeated challenges from Adrienne Rich and others: to help women, as well as men, learn to assert, insist, and resist, to critique language, to listen for silences, to make new connections. Believing that the objective, analytical, and competitive modes have already been overemphasized in educational institutions, many feminist teachers stress the subjective, contextual, and collaborative. Such changes involve not only a commitment of energy and time, but also an important shift in a teacher's perception of what counts as knowledge, equity, and learning. What does it mean to be a teacher in the midst of making these changes?

How and why would certain professors, who achieved success as students in traditional educational systems, radically change their own teaching practices to encourage more contextual writing and learning? How might a feminist writing teacher view her own movement to a philosophical

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position and teaching style that challenge the assumptions under which she herself was educated? How do we interpret and remake our traditional pasts as students to help us understand and evaluate what we are now attempting to do as teachers?

To hear the stories of some feminist writing teachers who had experienced these changes, I interviewed three women English department faculty members--Margaret, Alice and Julia. I also observed their teaching for a semester, and read their articles on feminist topics. All are white middle-class women in their forties. Each woman provided autobiographical details, emphasizing memories of her own college learning and writing, and discussing her current classroom practice.

I knew I would hear interpretations of what had happened in the past, not objective accounts of what "really" occurred. I expected to see that the past shapes the present and the present critiques the past. But I found the reverse also occurs, as present concerns shape the interpretation of the past, and memories of past training and experience continue to monitor, question, and critique present theory and practice. I expected fairly linear accounts of a journey from past into present. I found that the discovery of a personal, subjective connection to learning can affect not only one's teaching, but one's educational autobiography. In addition, a "traditional education" is far from monolithic: it includes the voices of numerous teachers, friends, fellow students, and colleagues, as well as many texts, and even alterate traditions (such as the sixties antiwar movement, in a tradition of civil disobedience). Even the conversations each woman had with me were part of the process of re-interpretation. Two of them said later that they had told their stories with more discontent than they expected, for they had been

happy, as a whole, with their education: one added, "I'm not sure I understood while I was in it that it was an alienating experience."

Certain patterns emerged as, first, these teachers critiqued their past education in terms of themes that are important in their professional lives today. Although their education was intellectually stimulating, they said, it failed to develop subjective response or allow the voicing of personal concerns. They interpreted the experiences of the past with the themes of the present, always posing and answering the question, "How did I get from there to here?" This making of meaning, this re-vision, is also what they urge their students to work on.

Margaret's story emphasized conscious resistance. She said she had always been political, believing that "thinking and talking about what you've read could change the world," and that "intellectual pursuit must include action." Many of her teachers shared these beliefs but did not allow them in class writing. Margaret "didn't take any chances" as an undergraduate but was "a resisting student" ten years later, in graduate school. She needed an advanced degree to teach college writing, but often came up against a criterion of objectivity, and a tradition of "initiation" that did not allow personal comment from apprentices. At each stage, from seminar paper to dissertation, to early professional articles, she battled the "personal voice" issue and had to compromise to reach her professional goals.

For Margaret there was a direct connection between her past experience as student and current practice as teacher--a continuity of opposition. Her teaching now represents a critique of certain requirements placed on her as a student. She asks her students "to connect what we're doing to what's happening to them." She uses journals, emphasizes inclusive language, highlights personal experience, and chooses readings to suggest a

variety of cultures and viewpoints. She emphasizes storytelling as a teaching strategy, saying she must identify herself to students who will be writing for her. Another practice is to "take on the teacherly role and then make fun" of the fact that she's doing it. She views this "marginal" commentary as feminist; it also fits the theme of resistance that she uses to interpret her educational experience. "I am more loyal to the student than to knowledge," she observed, and also admitted some ambivalence about these "tricky" priorities. She likes the label one student gave her: "a one-woman dialectic."

Unlike Margaret's, Alice's story was not about conscious conflict--but about conflicting discourses. Alice told of an intellectually stimulating education that did not show how to achieve a sense of personal connection with what she was reading and writing. Although her papers were successful with teachers, she did not feel she knew what she was doing when she was writing. But Alice occasionally glimpsed connection, without being able to name it until much later. For example, it was a revelation when an instructor commented that one of her papers "sounded just like her." Alice also remembered an examination question that asked her to define herself as either a Platonist or an Aristotelian; even this fairly formal exercise surprised her with the opportunity it offered to bring herself into the discussion. Alice's education moved along smoothly at the academic level, while at another level disturbing things were happening that she did not have a language for understanding. For example, as a graduate student, she felt like a misfit at meetings where discourse was aggressive and competitive. But after beginning to read feminist writers she decided that her discomfort had been justifiable, and that "community was also a viable mode for discourse." Now, having developed ways of evaluating her earlier experience, she recalls: "What I wrote then was not worthless but not

Alice remembered a series of encounters which served a dialectical purpose and set her each time in new directions. She had written a traditional literary dissertation, which was later published; but when she began reading women writers, she felt a strong emotional impact and did not want to analyze them as she had been taught. This stopped her from writing for awhile, because she was still dichotomizing analysis and emotional response--only now analysis was the villain. Using certain feminist essayists and critics as models gave her a way back into writing. Alice could also point to conversations with her students that caused her to adjust classroom practices; the students, she said, had astutely "challenged the continuity between course form and content." As a result, she decided to celebrate "dailiness" by placing more emphasis on journals, and to enable discussion, rather than organize "debate," in the classroom. Student journals and teacher responses help Alice stay in dialog with each student; experience is the starting point for writing in her decentered classroom. Alice said she watched for "teaching moments" when it might be possible to make students aware of difference

"Decentering" and the idea of community also provided a lens for Julia to evaluate her educational background. Julia recalled being educated through monolog, not dialog: "I was doing well in a coma," she said. "I learned to be a sponge and a vessel. The institutions lacked structures to allow me to work intellectually with other people." She wrote her senior thesis with no feedback from anyone. High-school teaching, which came between her MA and PhD work, first showed her the advantages of community. Julia was ambivalent about two other educational "traditions." Competition she found "stimulating" but "not conducive to the exchange of ideas" for her--because, while competitiveness was required, assertiveness

was not encouraged. Julia felt her education promised intellectual connections and "large synthesizing principles" that it finally could not provide because of disciplinary lines. She added, "I still distrust myself when I feel or sense intellectual connections that seem odd. I still wonder if this is . . . superficial thinking."

Julia saw an overall pattern, in her educational and career experience, she said, of "claiming some voice and feeling it continually undermined. In my career, I've needed continual transfusions." As a teacher in a special program she struggled "with the difference between what the institution wanted and what theory suggested," and "made a radical shift" that allowed her to have impact on the program's structure. Unlike Margaret's story of continuing resistance and occasional compromise, and Alice's of a paradigm shift, Julia's story is about learning resistance, and speaking out more and more. Applying this to her students, she said they need "to get a sense of self as a person who can do things with writing, a sense that they could make something of it if they committed themselves."

All three teachers have responded to certain gaps they perceive in their education by trying to present their students with opportunities for connection and expression. At the same time, their traditional education, as they remember it, continues to challenge what they are doing in their classrooms. The second part of the dialectic, then, is their use of the past to critique current practice. Their sense of the past does not "pull them back," but it provides ways of questioning what they're doing now.

For example, the issue of student "preparation"--for other classes, or for the "real world"--is difficult for teachers whose experience with school writing was different from what they are offering their students. These teachers recognize that, although so-called "nurturing" classroom experiences

might have been beneficial to them as students--they might not be ideal for all students. Margaret considered these problems and concluded, "Ideally we would create students who would be aggressive about their education. . . . We should be making our students impatient." Is a feminist classroom creating a knowledgeable, demanding student?

Julia, who recalled being a compliant but disengaged student in the traditional system, believed she should be seeing more aggressiveness and commitment in her own students. She said she felt conflict whenever students hadn't read or engaged with the material: "I still want them to be dutiful, responsible students, but not the same as the silent and dutiful student in the past." For Julia, the present-past dialectic produces a struggle toward a new definition of "good student."

Writing "standards" remained areas of worry for these teachers. Cluttered writing makes Margaret want to edit. But she waits until "editing days when Margaret the Monster appears." Julia feels tension when she thinks of tampering with the form of students' writing; but, she says, "my own writing is diffuse, and I rely on colleagues." Alice turns to another sense of the word "connection" to justify her concern with form: "I want the student to help me see how she got there," she explained. Though these women have not worked out all such conflicts, they don't suppress them.

Each woman has a double vision of her traditional education--from inside and outside. This makes possible a continuing dialectic. Margaret said, "We should be rebellious, but not because we're outsiders as some claim. We are the haves, not the have-nots," as far as education is concerned. "Any pretense otherwise is false. But we can take a stance on the margins, where we can see better." But watchfulness is necessary: "It's an easy trap," Margaret says,"--you work hard to get there (academia) and

the club feels good. You need to play the game to get the power you need to change the rules, but power corrupts." Game or not, her reflection on a personal history of academic training reminds each woman of her insider status as white and middle class, as well as her outsider status as female.

As a teacher, Margaret continues the same oppositional pattern she used as a student, only now the dominant term is different, and she makes the alternatives visible to students through metadiscourse and parody. For Alice, the academic-analytical discourse that she used as a student had occasional gaps through which she could sense the possibility of a "connected" approach that suited her better. A major shift brought this more holistic approach to the foreground and analysis was obscured for some time. Now, Alice uses analysis to check the consistency of her beliefs and practices; but these beliefs and practices are not compartmentalized--they inform her whole life. Out of Julia's experience of compliance came the realization that other ways of learning and knowing might be better--and not just for her. After years of listening to an academic discourse that did not deliver as promised, she concluded that not every student who seems content and academically involved is being well served by the institution.

In Feminist Dialogics, Dale Bauer says, 'The feminist struggle is not one between a conscious 'awakened' or natural voice and the voice of patriarchy 'out there.' Rather, precisely because we all internalize the authoritative voice of patriarchy, we must struggle to refashion inherited social discourses into words which rearticulate intentions (here feminist ones) other than normative or disciplinary ones." For feminists and feminist writing classes within the academy, this is a daily struggle. And we remake our goals and re-fashion our inherited educational discourses--not from outside them or beyond them, but in tension or dialogue with them.

One practical result is that these teachers are well aware of the role of power in their classrooms. Teachers of "student-centered" classes of some fifteen years ago were accused of running "therapy" or "consciousness raising" sessions, of substituting sentimental phoney warmth for "community," of assuming that students would blossom as soon as "power" was "given" to them. More seriously, they were accused of naivete and manipulation in their own uses of power--of thinking there was such a thing as an unstructured classroom. The reaction took us "back to basics," in yet another pendulum swing. But dialectic is an alternative to this periodic "swinging." Whether or not the criticisms of "student-centered" classrooms were justified, the "decentered classrooms" I observed are different, though superficially they may look similar. Because of their views of knowledge, learning, and equity, the teachers I studied do not speak from the center, or head, of the classroom. But they are aware of how much control they're exerting--and that a non-authoritarian setting does not mean that just anything is OK. They know they have agendas for their classes, and they aim to make these explicit. Because they monitor and critique present practice, they also recognize contradictions. For example, Margaret said, "You don't want to say you're in control, but your impulse is to control." Julia said, "My political responsibility is to make clear why I do what I do." Students need to be aware that there are always other ways, other options.

For each of these feminist writing teachers, her own educational history serves as a text to be periodically reread and reinterpreted. Even the most traditional education was multivocal--but some of the voices are now being heard for the first time. Certain comments, made in the past, are now interpreted differently. "Old" voices heard in student days also emerge, again, to challenge the teaching each woman is doing today. In justifying

herself to herself, each teacher has to be critically aware of her teaching practice, instead of viewing her approach as seamless and permanent. This is a process of continual self-reflection and self-location through dialogue with the past, with colleagues, and with students. I believe that the energy and innovation in current feminist composition teaching owe much to this awareness of alternatives, this dialectic.